INTRODUCTION

As one of the largest, most complex, and most culturally advanced civilizations in the world for most of recorded history, traditional China attracts our attention but defies our understanding. How should we approach the subject? What level of generalization is appropriate for a discussion of nearly one-quarter of humanity, some seven thousand years of continuous cultural development, and a geographic area stretching at times from Siberia to Vietnam and from the Pacific Ocean to Afghanistan? Aspiring students of Chinese culture might well be driven to despair.

There are, however, ways to manage the material, to reduce China's infinite cultural complexity to a finite mass. The most common approach is simply to chronicle or catalogue China's glittering cultural achievements, building a vast mosaic of undeniable brilliance but uncertain significance. Another approach is to compartmentalize Chinese culture into convenient but discrete categories such as art or literature, seeing each as distinct and essentially unrelated to the others. By long experience we are accustomed to looking at only the surface manifestations of traditional Chinese culture, without searching for the organizing principles that lay behind them and which gave them meaning.[1]

This study is concerned not with exhaustive description or convenient compartmentalization, but rather with interpretation, the search for meaning. Inspired in part by writings in the fields of cognitive and symbolic anthropology, it offers a fresh perspective on traditional Chinese culture by viewing that culture as a highly integrated "total system," rather than simply as the sum of its visible parts.

My primary concern is the cultural outlook of the traditional Chinese elite or "gentry" *(shen-shih)*—a group formally defined as holders of official degrees earned by passing the prestigious civil service examinations. This group, which together with their families constituted less than two percent of the entire population of China in late imperial times, nonetheless dominated much of the daily social life of agrarian China and also provided the pool of highly literate talent from which nearly all Chinese bureaucrats were drawn. Despite significant differences in their respective social back-

grounds and specific interests, these individuals had a remarkably uniform cultural outlook, as well as a common stake in the protection, promotion, and perpetuation of China's ancient and glorious cultural tradition. How did this unique class of scholars, artists, and administrators organize and explain the world around them? How did their conceptual structures and interpretations affect their behavior, and how, in turn, did these patterns of perception and behavior influence traditional Chinese society as a whole?

The period selected for investigation is the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912), the last imperial regime and a crucial bridge between traditional and modern life in China. The Ch'ing was the largest consolidated empire in Chinese history, and by far the most successful dynasty of conquest. On the whole, the Ch'ing period witnessed the fullest development of traditional political, economic, and social institutions, as well as the greatest degree of regional integration within China proper. No dynasty was more "Confucian" in outlook and emphasis. Furthermore, thanks largely to the systematic policy of sinicization undertaken by China's Manchu conquerors, and to the phenomenal peace and prosperity enjoyed by most Chinese during the reigns of the K'ang-hsi, Yung-cheng, and Ch'ien-lung emperors, the Ch'ing was a period of enrichment and leisurely fulfillment in material culture and the arts.[2] Overall, the Ch'ing represented the highwater mark of traditional Chinese culture, although ultimately the dynasty and the dynastic system itself fell victim to unprecedented internal pressures and to erosion by Western ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What did members of the Chinese elite have in mind when they spoke (or more aptly, wrote) of "culture"? The closest equivalent term in classical Chinese is *wen*. *Wen* conveys a wide range of meanings, most of which derive from the basic sense of "markings" or "patterns." *Wen* refers narrowly to Chinese writing and literature, but more broadly to a whole constellation of distinctive cultural attributes—art, music, ritual, and so forth—each of which, like literature, had an expressly moral component. *Wen* was the measure of a Confucian gentleman in traditional China, the mark of true "civilization."[3] *Wen* did not, however, carry any of the meanings we associate with the Latin terms *civis* or *civitas*. Members of the Chinese elite did not consider themselves to be "citizens" of the realm in the classical Western sense, and although Chinese cities were often the source of gentry amusement, they were not really centers of culture in the way the elite defined it.

Nor was culture simply a matter of individual preference and lifestyle. China was itself viewed primarily as a cultural entity. Although the most frequently used term for China, *Chung-kuo* (the "Central Kingdom"), implies an awareness of the country as both a political and a geographical unit, a common alternative term, *Chung-hua* (the "Central Cultural Florescence") reflects a long-standing emphasis on the cultural basis of the Chi-

nese state. Few Ch'ing scholars would have disagreed with the following fourteenth century definition of China: "Central Cultural Florescence is another term for Central Kingdom. When a people subjects itself to the Kingly Teachings [i.e., Confucianism] and subordinates itself to the Central Kingdom; when in its clothing it is dignified and decorous, and when its customs are marked by filial respect and brotherly submission; when conduct follows the accepted norms and the principle of righteousness, then one may call it [a part of the] Central Cultural Florescence."[4] Barbarian conquest affirmed and reinforced this Sino-centric world view rather than shattering it.

How did the Chinese order their vast cultural world, which embraced "all under Heaven" *(T'ien-hsia)*? One useful but seldom used index is the famous Ch'ing encyclopedia *Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng* (Complete Collection of Writings and Illustrations, Past and Present), completed in 1725 after decades of imperially-commissioned collective labor. This massive and well-organized compendium, repository of "all that was best in the literature of the past, dealing with every branch of knowledge," was intended not only as a kind of moral and practical guide for the emperor and his officials, but also as an expression of the unity and totality of Chinese culture. I have used a content analysis of the encyclopedia, together with other official and unofficial compilations, as a general guide to the cultural concerns and patterns of perception of the Ch'ing elite.[5] Collectively, these sources attest to the extraordinary holism of the Chinese cultural vision—the conviction that "all strains of thought, all institutions, [and] all forms of behavior should embody and express a common set of values."[6] This holistic cultural outlook is strikingly expressed in the widespread use of the same critical and evaluative terms in virtually all realms of Chinese culture, from government and politics to art and literature.[7]

The key concept, or controlling metaphor, that informed the Ch'ing elite outlook was the pervasive notion of *yin-yang* duality, the belief that experience could be explained in terms of paired concepts ranging from such mundane sensory perceptions as dark and light or wet and dry, to abstractions such as real and unreal or being and non-being. The unique feature of this particular outlook was that whether viewed as evaluative categories or as cosmic creative forces, *yin* and *yang* (as well as their numerous conceptual equivalents) were non-antagonistic opposites—complementary, but inherently unequal. *Yin-yang* interaction thus involved not only mutual dependence and ceaseless alternation, but also the idea of balance and "harmony based on hierarchical difference."[8] Unity of opposites was always the cultural ideal.

Much that is most distinctive about traditional Chinese culture can be explained by reference to *yin-yang* concepts and to the elaborate correlative thinking associated with these ideas.[9] *Yin-yang* polarities appear in the de-

scription or evaluation of nearly every area of traditional Chinese life, from art and literature to geomancy and personality analysis. Surprisingly, however, very little scholarly attention has been given to the broad cultural implications of *yin-yang* concepts and correlations by either historians or anthropologists.

Even more surprising is the neglect of the ancient Chinese classic known as the *I-ching* (Book of Changes) as a means of understanding and appreciating the cultural outlook of the Chinese elite. Most books on Chinese history and culture mention the cryptic classic only briefly, acknowledging its central place in the canonical literature, but then dismissing it as an impenetrable work of "awesome obscurity."[10] I am convinced, however, that the *I-ching* is the single most important document to a full understanding of the Chinese cultural tradition.

In the first place, the *I-ching* represented the ultimate expression of *yin-yang* thinking. Second, it was the meeting point between the philosophical poles of Confucianism, with its emphasis on social responsibility, and Taoism, with its orientation toward self and escape. Both schools claimed it as a classic. Third, the *I-ching* transcended class, in the sense that all sectors of society, from emperor to peasant, used it in some form, for some purpose. It was at once a practical book of divination (communicated to peasants through the medium of professional fortune-tellers) and a convenient repository of timeless wisdom and truth, expressed in highly symbolic form. The "Great Commentary" *(Ta-chuan)* of the *I-ching* states simply: "The Book of Changes contains the measure of heaven and earth; therefore it enables us to comprehend the *tao* [way] of heaven and earth and its order."[11]

We need not believe in the *I-ching* to take it seriously. Consider the following quote from the famous Sung dynasty compilation *Chin-ssu lu* (Reflections on Things at Hand), described by one authority as "unquestionably the most important single work of philosophy produced in the Far East during the second millennium A.D.": "[The *I-ching*] is comprehensive, great, and perfect. It is intended to bring about accord with the principle of the nature and destiny, to penetrate the causes of the hidden and the manifest, to reveal completely the nature of things and affairs, and to show the way to open up resources and to accomplish great undertakings."[12] The renowned Ming scholar Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) wrote in a similar vein: "The *Book of Changes* exhausts all the truths of the three powers—Heaven, Earth, and Man *(san-ts'ai)*."[13] Throughout the Ch'ing period, the *I-ching* remained a sacred work of virtually unchallenged scriptural authority, serving both as a moral guide to action and as a stupendous symbolic filing system.

Almost anything could be explained by the *I-ching*, from science and mathematics to sexual life and the supernatural. References to it abound in philosophical discourse as well as literary, artistic, and other forms of

aesthetic criticism. It is not too much to say that the *I-ching* reflects, in both its stark symbolism and its poetic commentaries, many of the most fundamental thought patterns and cultural concerns of the Chinese elite. It was a Confucian and a Taoist classic, this-worldly and ethical, yet also profoundly metaphysical. It emphasized the bipolarity of nature and yet stressed unity and harmony. Cryptic and challenging, it was also comfortingly holistic. Small wonder virtually all of China's greatest thinkers found inspiration in the classic, and many were absorbed by it.

Yet we know that the vast majority of Chinese in the Ch'ing period, as in earlier periods of Chinese history, were illiterate and oppressed. To what extent were the elite cultural concerns discussed above similar to, or congruent with, those of the rest of society? On the surface it would appear that a vast and unbridgeable gulf separated commoners and gentry: They wore different clothes, ate different foods, lived in different dwellings, and occupied different positions in the eyes of both society at large and the state. Yet I am persuaded that certain fundamental elite concepts, values, and attitudes penetrated traditional "folk" culture to a much greater extent than is generally recognized. Thus what may appear on the surface to be significant differences in organization and outlook on the part of various groups in Chinese society may in fact be reflections or expressions of basic uniformities, important cultural common denominators.[14] The evidence for this hypothesis may be found in many areas of traditional Chinese life, including religion, language, popular literature, amusements, urban-rural relationships, orthodox social and political institutions, and even secret societies.

Taken as a whole, then, traditional Chinese culture is remarkable for its cohesiveness, integration, and astonishing longevity. Certainly China's experience offers a sharp contrast to the cultural development of Europe, especially over the past thousand years or so. Among other things, China has had no parallel to what Lancelot Whyte has called "European schizophrenia": the "great chasm of the West between the sacred and the secular, betwen Pope and Emperor, between the angels and the atoms."[15]

How do we explain China's distinctive historical experience? Why did the Chinese empire endure and prosper while every other empire of antiquity or the Middle Ages ultimately fell? Mark Elvin emphasizes material factors such as the "economics of technology."[16] Ho Ping-ti points to important agricultural, religious, and linguistic considerations.[17] Joseph Needham has suggested the useful cybernetic metaphors of "feedback" and "homeostasis" to describe the tendency in Chinese society toward evolutionary equilibrium rather than rapid and fundamental change.[18] Other important factors include the totalitarian organization of the Chinese state, the examination system, and the lack of culturally competing neighbors.

But none of these explanations has focused on the idea of *yin-yang* duality as an integrative concept. This study suggests that the notion of *yin-*

yang alternation and reconciliation of opposites not only provided the foundation for Chinese aesthetic attitudes and conditioned much of the Chinese outlook toward reality, but also encouraged eclecticism, accommodation, and evolutionary change in traditional Chinese culture as a whole, ensuring continued vitality but allowing little room for the entering wedge of revolutionary change until after the traumatic Western impact in the mid-nineteenth century. Further, it suggests that an appreciation of this fundamental feature of traditional Chinese culture may help explain the character, speed, and direction of culture change in China from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

NOTES

As a convenience to non-specialists, and in the interest of brevity, I have cited only readily-available Western-language sources in the notes.

1. Recent "trade book" accounts of traditional Chinese culture include Leon Stover's *The Cultural Ecology of Chinese Civilization* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario, 1974), and Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Mind of China* (New York, 1974).

2. See P. T. Ho, "The Significance of the Ch'ing Period in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* **26**, no. 2 (February 1967): 189-195.

3. Arthur Wright, "The Study of Chinese Civilization," *Journal of the History of Ideas* **21**, no. 2 (April-June 1960): 234-235.

4. Cited in Arthur Wright, "On the Uses of Generalization in the Study of Chinese History," in Louis Gottschalk, ed., *Generalization in the Writing of History* (Chicago, 1963), p. 39.

5. Richard J. Smith, "The Cultural Significance of the Ch'ing Encyclopedia *Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng*," the Fondren Library *Flyleaf* **27**, no. 2 (1977): 3-5.

6. Wright, "On the Uses," p. 40.

7. Frederick Mote, "The Arts and the 'Theorizing Mode' of the Civilization," in Christian Murck, ed., *Artists and Traditions* (Princeton, 1976).

8. Derk Bodde, *China's Cultural Tradition: What and Whither?* (New York, Chicago, etc., 1957), pp. 34-37; also Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton, 1976), chapters 3 and 4, esp. pp. 43-49, 54-60.

9. Richard J. Smith, "An Approach to the Study of Traditional Chinese Culture," *Chinese Culture* **19**, no. 2 (June 1978): 47-78. This article contains references to many sources I am

unable to cite here because of space limitations. I urge readers interested in further study of China to consult my earlier article and its notes for direction to other important works.

10. See, for example, even the excellent text by Charles Hucker, *China's Imperial Past* (Stanford, 1975), p. 72.

11. The standard translation is by Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton, 1967). This passage is from p. 293.

12. Chu Hsi and Lü Tsu-ch'ien, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, translated and annotated by Wing-Tsit Chan (New York and London, 1967), p. 108.

13. Quoted in Tu Wei-ming, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1976), p. 136.

14. See, for example, Smith, "An Approach," pp. 51, 61-65, 71, 74-75.

15. Cited in Joseph Needham, *Moulds of Understanding* (London, 1976), p. 278.

16. Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, 1973).

17. P. T. Ho, *The Cradle of the East* (Hong Kong, 1975).

18. Joseph Needham, "Science and China's Influence on the World," in Raymond Dawson, ed., *The Legacy of China* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 305-306.